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SUBJECT: PAN-ISLAMIC THINK TANK WEIGHS IN FOR
DEMOCRATIC VALUES, BUT NOT THE U.S. KIND

REF: JERUSALM 02915

[11.](#) Summary. Under the auspices of Crown Prince Hamza, the Aal-al-Beit Foundation held a conference, Aug. 20 - 23, on "The Islamic System of Governance and Democracy." About 40 well-known Islamic scholars and media personalities, such as Sheikh Yousuf Al Qardawi of Al Jazeera fame, affirmed that Islamic principles of governance include rule of law, representative government and tolerance as well as a commitment to equality for all. King Abdullah met with the scholars, and the conference received front-page coverage in the local media. Despite interventions by the PAO, who also attended several sessions, the scholars portrayed Western democracy, especially the U.S. model, as morally bankrupt and arrogant towards other cultures and beliefs. But they also rejected existing authoritarian systems in the Arab world and stressed the need for political reform. End Summary.

Islam: the Real Democracy

[12.](#) In the early days, the speakers pointed out, the Prophet and his immediate successors emphasized rule of law and submission to the rule of the majority as expressed by the Shura councils. Early Islamic governance likewise treated all men equally, including non-Muslims, and codified tolerance of other religious beliefs and practices. Besides the executive, legislative and judicial branches, Islam establishes a fourth center of power, they maintained: the divine but all-accommodating pillars of the faith.

Don't Imitate the U.S.

[13.](#) The scholars appeared to be unanimous in rejecting the Western and especially the U.S. model of democracy. This system lacks any ethical or moral compass, according to several presenters, and suffers from the "tyranny of the majority," which can mandate such "aberrations" as gay marriage and extramarital sex. Several speakers sounded like Marxists from the sixties as they decried the "materialist basis" of Western democracy, in which the rich buy votes and control the media. Without material prosperity propped up by technology, one scholar maintained, Western democracy would collapse into chaos.

The Judeo-Christian "Menace"

[14.](#) The real proof of the flaws in western democracy, several scholars argued, was U.S. policy toward Palestine and Iraq and the "Crusade" against Islam. How could a government that espouses freedom and equality embrace "the racist policies of the Sharon government?" In a session on "the American Position towards Religion," a professor who had lived and taught in the U.S. claimed that in order to fill the moral void, American government and society have adopted a "Judeo-Christian" ideology that would inevitably bring the U.S. directly into a clash with the Islamic world. When the PAO interjected that successive U.S. administrations have gone out of their way to express respect for Islam and there was no intention of imposing any form of democracy on the region, the scholar dismissed these statements. From the days of Athens and Rome, he stated, the West has always pursued a "With Us or Against Us" policy towards other cultures and beliefs. The only exceptions were brief, cynical alliances such as U.S. support for Afghan rebels against the Soviets.

But They Still Want Dialogue

[15.](#) Despite the anti-U.S. rhetoric, most of the speakers stressed their desire for dialogue and tolerance, both

to counter homegrown extremism and to improve the image of Islam in the West. They also urged reform and progress towards democracy of the Islamic kind in the Muslim world. "The worst form of democracy is better than the best dictatorship," one scholar said. In private conversations with the PAO, and with Charg over a dinner hosted by Crown Prince Hamzeh, many of the participants adopted a much friendlier tone, saying that they wanted additional contact and cooperation; several were U.S. -bound and seeking assistance with their visas.